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SUBJECT: LUKEWARM CZECH REACTION TO PRESIDENTIAL SIGNING OF
"IMPLEMENTING 9/11 RECOMMENDATIONS" BILL

¶1. (U) Czech reaction to President Bush's August 3 signing of the "Implementing 9/11 Recommendations" bill has been surprisingly muted, given that the door is now open for the Czech Republic's much-coveted membership in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). We did see some positive press in late July when the bill came out of conference; at the time, Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg was quoted in the press as saying it is a positive step toward Czech VWP membership. He also noted that the Czechs do not need to worry about whether they qualify as having cooperated with the U.S. in the war on terror, since regardless of their decision on hosting a U.S. missile defense radar, Czech troops are with the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan. Psychologically, VWP status would be a huge boost to the Czechs, who long for the end of "second-class EU citizen" status; however, at the moment they are displaying characteristic caution and skepticism.

LITTLE MEDIA REACTION TO BILL; CZECH EXPECTATIONS ARE GUARDED

¶2. (U) While the issue has been covered in a factual manner online and in the weekly Reflex magazine, and has been discussed on the street, we have seen no opinion pieces on the President's actual signing of the bill. Reaction has likely been muted because the issue has already gotten significant play in the media in mid-to-late July, with print, radio and TV all stressing that visa waiver will not take effect immediately and that the proposed Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) may require similar amounts of data from prospective travelers to the U.S. as current visa applications. An online journalist noted that he was tempted to feel proud of Czech accomplishments, but then remembered the 1990s, when Czechs were told they were the powerhouse of Central Europe, only to face a humiliating 1997 economic crisis. He wondered what the catch is in the current situation. MFA spokesperson Zuzana Opletalova on July 27 welcomed the news that both houses of Congress had agreed on language but cautioned that actual abolishment of visas would take around two years. Leading daily Lidove Noviny commented on July 27, "People will still have to go through the screening process and provide lots of data beforehand. But it is still progress." Jiri Roskot warned on July 27 in left-leaning daily Pravo, "Cancelling visas will not mean paradise with no restrictions. And if Czechs overstay, Washington will lift the drawbridge quickly again."

¶3. (U) The most tepid response may have come from Czech Ambassador to the U.S., Petr Kolar, in a radio interview on July 30, highlighting a repatriation clause as one of the "absurdities" in the bill. Kolar went on to say that Czech lawyers will need to examine this and other provisions, implying that the road ahead will be a long slog.

MFA STATEMENT STRESSES SOLIDARITY; CONSULAR OFFICIALS PLEASED BUT CONCERNED ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION

¶4. (U) The MFA issued an August 3 statement welcoming the signature

of the bill, noting, "This means that the way to visa-free relations between the U.S. and the CR exists." However, it also stressed solidarity with other VWP hopefuls: "The current version of the law does not meet the expectations of the 'Coalition for visa equality' countries. The law keeps the refusal rate criterion as a condition for granting Visa Waiver. The aspiring countries have no chance to influence the number of rejected applications."

15. (U) MFA Consular Department officials were pleased that the President signed the bill but not overly enthusiastic about the VWP legislation as passed by Congress. They noted four major concerns: 1) Data privacy issues related to required information sharing, 2) The method of reporting and level of detail of Lost/Stolen PPT data, 3) The required repatriation of people classified as "former" citizens of a country, and 4) the uniformity of the new VWP requirements and that all members, not just new members, would be held to all the requirements of the new law.

OPINION ON THE STREET DIVIDED

16. (U) An informal poll of press section contacts indicates that many Czechs who already possess a U.S. visa do not pay close attention to the VWP issue. Their perception is that they will be able to get or renew a 10-year visa and travel to the U.S. without problem. Indeed, many would welcome under the new requirements not having to travel to Prague for an interview, and they do not object to submitting information online. However, those who are following the new legislation closely complain that they will still be required to submit information to U.S. authorities, and that they will have to pay \$20 each time for the ETA (which, in the case of frequent travelers, will soon amount to more than the \$100 application fee). One contact claimed, "This new system is worse than nothing for Europe. America is going to kill two birds with one stone - it will maintain that it has abolished visas for Eastern Europeans but in reality, it will impose visas on Western Europeans

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too." In addition, two stubborn myths persist: public perception of visa refusals as arbitrary, and the perception that the Czech Republic will get VWP status as a quid pro quo for agreeing to host a missile defense radar station.

THOMPSON-JONES